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I spoke at Vanderbilt University Law School in Nashville yesterday where I presented a “Transgender 101” talk to approximately 75 students and administrators. I was warmly received and let me tell you, Vanderbilt is the only law school I’ve ever visited that provided a personalized parking spot with my name on it (and just adjacent to the front doors, to boot!). Awesome!

When I asked, “Who knows someone who’s transgender?”, roughly sixty percent of the audience members raised their hands. It was great to see and proof that more trans persons are showing up in the world. (Indeed, a study from the University of Minnesota Center for Human Sexuality released this week reveals that 2.8% of 80,000 surveyed Minnesota high school students identified as gender variant. Here’s the link to that study; for PDF readers, Google, “Minnesota high school student study on gender variant.”)

While my talk focused on the basics of what it means to be transgender, I also spoke about allyship since my contact at the school, third-year law student Jenny Saufley, asked specifically about strategies on how to be supportive of transgender people. I spoke of the value of “shoulder, voice and pen” as ways to assist trans folks: “shoulder” denotes being there to talk with or comfort someone who identifies as transgender or gender nonconforming, since we often encounter challenges that make life very difficult; “voice” means speaking up on our behalf when we’re not in the room or when we’re fatigued (as in the case of when someone misgenders [e.g. uses the wrong pronoun] us); and “pen”—working to put into place policies and laws that protect us.

Unfortunately, I ran out of time with my talk (I tried to give a 120-minute talk in 50 minutes), so I didn’t have a chance to take audience questions. I have since received an email from an attendee re: the role of religion in my transition and going forward in the world as Ellie. (The short answer: I grew up Catholic, which caused me to believe that my sole purpose in life was to sacrifice for others. That resulted in tremendous self-repression, depression and near suicide. Today, I live as a Buddhist trying to exemplify human connectedness and compassion for self and for others.)

As compared to state-focused Ole Miss Law School where I spoke on Tuesday, Vanderbilt, a Top 20 law school, has more of a national focus. You immediately sense this the moment you walk in the door—dozens of framed posters line the hallways advertising past speakers of national prominence and their talks at the school. The students themselves speak of taking jobs at large firms in New York or in other cities.

Unlike the students at Ole Miss (most of whom planned to stay in Mississippi or adjoining states), I didn't get the sense that students at Vanderbilt were intent on investing in Nashville or Tennessee. There's absolutely nothing wrong with that—indeed, we need new lawyers from a Southern law school to venture across the country to share their perspective while investing in other places—it's just something that I noted.

What I also found was that even though Nashville is a cosmopolitan city, it's still part of the South with "traditional" values. I don't believe any faculty members attended my talk (I did meet one professor in the hallway who expressed regret that he couldn't attend), and I don't know if that was simply reflective of busy schedules or of something else. I share this because for any organization (whether it's a business, government entity, nonprofit or educational organization) to be truly inclusive, it's paramount that culture leaders buy into the value of inclusivity. No inclusivity initiative will ever "stick" without genuine culture leader support and promotion.

Importantly, there were law school and general university administrators in the audience; two female administrators approached me afterward to say that they really appreciated my talk. It was great to hear since I always stress the need to give legal profession administrators and support colleagues inclusivity training since they too, matter.

After my talk, I met with several members and allies of the Vanderbilt OUTLaw (e.g. LGBTQ) chapter for a delightful conversation that covered a range of topics. We discussed various inclusivity strategies, including something as simple as mandating that nametags (used for student orientation or mixers) include both one's name and preferred pronoun.

I also shared with the OUTLaw group the need to be aware of fatigue as they do their equity work (I relayed what I heard about fatigue from lawyers in Birmingham earlier in the week). I spoke of how every law student and lawyer should regularly engage in therapy (indeed, one student volunteered that she had a therapist—I praised her for sharing this since it normalizes the value of therapy). I also stressed that journaling (e.g. old fashion writing in a book of plain white paper) was critical since it acts as a safety or relief valve from life's stresses.

I really appreciated the candor of Jenny and her fellow students; it was a great reminder of why it's important to talk about our common struggle to survive the Human Condition. As one student put it, "We get a lot of speakers who talk about technical or esoteric legal topics; we don't often hear about humanity or what it means to be human."

Today, I'm in Indianapolis to speak on human inclusivity at McKinney Law School. This is the last stop of my speaking and listening tour. It will be good to get back to Minneapolis—I need to be planted for a while where I can ponder and write about what I've learned these past ten days.

ellie
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